

BELSHAZZAR—THE STRANGE SAGA OF A DRUNKEN KING, A PAIR OF KNOCKING KNEES, A DETACHED HAND, AND A DOOMED EMPIRE

Presented by

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In our Sunday-morning class, “A Journey through the Old Testament,” Blake and I have experienced some things that can only be described as...well...“**strange.**” While there are numerous examples that I could mention, here is a brief list of just a few of the most-memorable ones.

- Not long after the Israelites had left Egypt and begun their exodus toward the Promised Land, they ended up in the Wilderness of Shur. Exodus 15:22 informs us that “they went three days in the wilderness and found no water.” However, at the end of those three days they finally came to Marah, which had water. Unfortunately, as Exodus 15:23 goes on to explain, the Israelites “could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter.” The Israelites—as they would do many, many times during the coming forty years—complained to Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” So, how did Moses solve this problem? Exodus 15:24 says, “He cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree. When he cast it into the waters, the waters were made sweet.” I wonder how many scientists today would tell the elected officials of any city with a bitter water supply to simply “toss a tree into your reservoir, and that will make your bitter waters turn sweet.” Weird, eh?
- Early in the book of Joshua we saw the Israelites finally enter the Promised Land after having wandered in the wilderness for forty years. The first city they were planning to attack was the heavily fortified, walled city of Jericho, which the Bible says in Joshua 6:1 was “securely shut up” so that “no one went out, and no one came in.” So, exactly how did the Israelites end up capturing the mighty city of Jericho? Joshua instructed the Israelites to march around the city one time on each of six successive days. Then, on the seventh day, he ordered them to march around the city seven times, at the end of which the Israelites’ priests were to blow their trumpets while all of the Israelites shouted with what Joshua 6:5 calls “a great shout.” And what happened when the Israelites and their priests finally finished doing such unusual things? The Bible says simply, “The walls of the city fell down flat” (Joshua 6:5). Strange, eh?
- In 1 Samuel 4 and 5, we studied the account of how the Israelites carried the Ark of the Covenant into battle, and ended up allowing it be captured by the Philistines. The first thing the Philistines did was to take Ark from the site of its capture at Ebenezer to Ashdod, where they placed it in the temple of their fish-god idol, Dagon. They set the ark next to Dagon, only to discover the next morning that their precious idol had fallen on its face before the Ark. So they took Dagon and set him upright. However, when they arose early the next morning, there was Dagon, fallen on its face to the ground before the Ark once more—except this time Dagon’s head and both the palms of its hands were broken off, leaving on Dagon’s torso intact. In what might be considered a somewhat humorous commentary on this admittedly extraordinary series of events, the Bible says rather dryly, “Therefore neither the priests of Dagon nor any who come into Dagon’s house tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day” (1 Samuel 5:5). Bizarre, huh?
- As if the matter of Dagon’s inexplicable demise was not strange enough, even stranger things began to happen among the Philistines who had captured the Ark of the Covenant. At first, those Philistines were delighted to have stolen such a valuable treasure from their Israelite enemies. But the Philistines’ joy and excitement soon were replaced with dread and death as they realized that everywhere the Ark went, people broke out with unexplained, fatal tumors all over their bodies. The first city to be affected was Ashdod, the Philistines’

capital. The second city to experience this unusual phenomenon was Gath. Then the same thing happened when the Ark was transferred to Akron. The text of 1 Samuel 5:11 fairly well sums up what happened wherever the Ark was sent when it says, “There was a deadly destruction throughout all the city.” Then, to make matters even odder still, the Philistines’ priests came up with a genuinely weird solution to try to solve their problem. They decided to build a new wooden cart, place the Ark on top of it, hook it up to a couple of cows, and see if the cows, of their own accord, would take the Ark back to Beth Shemesh, a city in Israel—something that those two cows did the very moment they were released! Odd—right?

But surely one of the strangest things that Blake and I have experienced during our “Journey through the Old Testament” occurred on the very last day of the existence of the once-powerful Babylonian Empire. Here, according to Daniel 5, is what happened.

The king of Babylon at that point in time was a man by the name of Belshazzar. The Bible tells us that Belshazzar decided to throw a great feast for “a thousand of his lords.” During that feast, Belshazzar got drunk. And in his drunken stupor, he ordered the gold and silver vessels that King Nebuchadnezzar had taken from Solomon’s temple to be brought to the feast so that he and his guests could drink wine out of them. Daniel 5:4 says simply, “They drank wine, and praised their gods of gold and silver, bronze and iron, wood and stone.”

Then, without any warning whatsoever, something **really** unusual happened. Suddenly, the fingers of a man’s detached hand appeared and began to write something on the wall of the king’s palace. This caught Belshazzar by such surprise that Daniel 5:6 says that “the king’s countenance changed, and his thoughts troubled him, so that the joints of his hips were loosened **and his knees knocked against each other.**” I bet they did!

But things were about to get **even stranger**. As the detached hand began to move across the wall, its fingers wrote the following words: MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN. Daniel 5:7 tells us that poor King Belshazzar “cried aloud to bring in the astrologers, the Chaldeans, and the soothsayers,” and said to them, “Whoever reads this writing, and tells me its interpretation, shall be clothed with purple and shall have a chain of gold around his neck, and shall be the third ruler in the kingdom.” A lot of good that sweet offer did anyone—because not a single one of those astrologers or soothsayers could decipher the meaning of the words that the hand had written so plainly on the palace wall.

Eventually, as I’m sure all of you know (since this story is one of the most-famous in the Old Testament), the prophet Daniel was summoned by Belshazzar to interpret the unusual message. Daniel did exactly as he was asked to do—and told the king what the message had to say to him. Daniel 5:26-28 gives the content of Daniel’s explanation:

“This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; UPHARSIN: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians.”

This was truly and genuinely **strange**, wouldn't you say—to have a finger from a detached man's hand writing weird words on a wall to present a message of doom to the most powerful king on the Earth at the time? So what happened after Daniel finished telling Belshazzar what the peculiar message meant? Daniel 5:30-31 says simply, “That very night Belshazzar, king of the Chaldeans, was slain. And Darius the Mede received the kingdom, being about sixty-two years old.” As the result of an eccentric message on a palace wall, the world-dominating Babylonian Empire fell—and the new Medo-Persian Empire took center stage in Earth's history. Go figure!

Oh, but the story does not end there. Things were about to get **even stranger!** As you may remember, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem and taken the people of Judah captive. In fact, those Jews remained in Babylonian captivity for seventy years. But when the Medo-Persian Empire defeated the Babylonian Empire, Cyrus the Great became the most-powerful man on Earth. And when he did, he did something so outlandish that it defies belief, much less explanation. Cyrus' actions are recorded in Ezra 1:1-3—

“Cyrus king of Persia, made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying, ‘Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth the Lord God of heaven has given me. And He has commanded me to build Him a house at Jerusalem which is in Judah. Who is among you of all His people? May his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem which is in Judah, and build the house of the Lord God of Israel (He is God), which is in Jerusalem.’ ”

Can you believe **that?** Talk about **seriously strange!** A pagan king suddenly decides to release all the Jews who had been held captive in Babylon for seventy years—and simultaneously decides to send them back to Jerusalem with a mandate to rebuild Solomon's temple?! What in the world is going on here?

The answer to this incredible turn of events is found within the Scriptures. The prophet Isaiah had prophesied—almost 150 years before Cyrus' birth!—God's decree regarding the Medo-Persian king: “Cyrus is My shepherd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be built,’ and to the temple, ‘Your foundation shall be laid’ ” (Isaiah 44:28). One chapter later, in Isaiah 45:1, Isaiah went on to say, “Thus says the Lord to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—that you will subdue nations and loose the armor of kings.” Cyrus did indeed “subdue nations”—including the seemingly invincible Babylonian Empire. And he truly did “loosen the armor of kings,” including that of Belshazzar, whom he captured and killed.

So how did this strange saga end? After seventy long years of captivity, the Jews finally received their freedom, and 50,000 of them ended up returning to Jerusalem to rebuild the beloved “City of David” and Solomon's temple—all because of a pagan king's seemingly inexplicable decree, along with the previous predictions of God's prophets (like Isaiah and Jeremiah) that “a remnant” would indeed return to

Judah. King Cyrus got it exactly right when he decreed, “All the kingdoms of the earth, the Lord God of heaven has given me.” And that same great God was going to use that pagan king to accomplish His plan to bring from that tiny Jewish remnant “the Lion of Judah—the root of David” (Revelation 5:5)—Jesus Christ, the son of God, just as He had promised as far back as Genesis 3:15. But that is another story altogether—one that I will let Blake tell you in his sermon, “Behold...I Will Make a New Covenant.”